Department of Human Services

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Thursday, March 6, 2008

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Prepared by the DHS Office of Communications (517) 373-7394



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*Important story at this spot



Foster care shouldn't be left in bureaucrats' hands

EDITORIAL

The Oakland Press

Afew years ago, in another campaign season, the idea that "it takes a village" to raise a child was a popular point of discussion around America.

While it may be helpful to have input from around the village, it seems clear that the village government itself is not the ideal parent. Nor is state government.

Unfortunately for too many children, the state is the only option they have when their own parents fail to live up to their responsibilities.

A federal class action lawsuit now working its way through the court system claims that Michigan's foster care system is horribly broken.

It is arguing that the governmental system of caring for abused and neglected children in Michigan is so understaffed that it is, in effect, a form of abuse or neglect itself. The state government, not surprisingly, rejects that claim.

The suit was filed in 2006 by New York-based advocacy group Children's Rights. A trial is tentatively set for June in Detroit.

It is likely the truth lies somewhere between what Children's Rights claims and what the state asserts.

Negotiations between the state and Children's Rights have resumed recently. The two sides broke off talks more than a year ago after the state Department of Human Services said it simply did not have the money to make the changes Children's Rights was demanding. A war of words - reports, claims and counterclaims - followed.

Now, thanks in part to some proposals in next year's state budget, the two sides have started talking again.

Trouble appears to abound for the state, as well as the 19,000 or so abused and neglected children it is responsible for.

If the trial goes forward and the state wins, it is likely that few improvements will be made in the lives of these fragile children.

If the state loses, the federal government will likely have to step in and take over the state system, at least for a time.

Does anyone think passing the problem off to an even larger bureaucracy will improve things for the youngsters?

Since the Children's Rights lawsuit was filed, the state has hired nearly 200 more foster care workers this budget year and has been boosting rates paid to private agencies that care for abused, neglected or delinquent children. Under the proposed 2009 state budget submitted by Gov. Jennifer Granholm, the extra workers and extra funding will not be reduced.

But even that might not be enough.

"I appreciate the budget the governor has proposed, but I don't think it's going to go far enough to mitigate the lawsuit," Jack Kresnak, president of Michigan's Children, an advocacy group in Lansing, told The Associated Press. "This is a serious situation, and we could find ourselves on the wrong end of a judgment here that will hurt our state."

Keeping the needs of our children in the forefront, we strongly urge the state DHS and Children's Rights to stay at the negotiating table until an arrangement that all sides can live with is found.

No one will win - not the taxpayers nor the children - if this suit ends up going to trial.

The whole village of advocacy groups, foster care workers, elected politicians and state taxpayers must come together to raise these children.

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Foster kids' college money cut

\$2.3-million fund not enough to cover need

BY ROBIN ERB • FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER • March 6, 2008

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A nearly \$2.3-million pool of college money for foster care youths is drying up quickly -- so much so that participants have been told that the maximum benefit has been cut in half.

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Last year, the state handed out Education and Training Vouchers to 452 students who either aged out or were close to aging out of foster care, said Ann Rossi, the ETV coordinator for Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, which administers the program.

With more than 250 students already applying for the program this year -- months before the summer crush of applications -- the state has cut maximum payouts from \$5,000 to \$2,500 per student, she said.

Rossi said she recently sat down with staff from the Michigan Department of Human Services to figure out how to stretch the money. "We were there for hours. There are no good options," she said.

While other scholarships or federal aid cover tuition, the ETV can be used for any expense if it helps a youth pursue college or other training after high school. That's important because former foster care youths usually have no parents to turn to for help, Rossi said.

Tiffany Harris, a 20-year-old Marygrove College student from Detroit, said she uses the money to pay for child care for her 3-year-old son and for gas to get to classes and her job at a home for people with mental illness.

But with budget cuts and a tight economy, she's not surprised by the cut.

"Any time a college student and mother of a 3-year-old can get help, that's great," she said. "We're fortunate to have received it this long."

Contact ROBIN ERB at 313-222-2708 or rerb@freepress.com.

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Police seek help in Calista Springer case

Posted by Kathy Jessup | Kalamazoo Gazette

March 06, 2008 11:00AM

WHITE PIGEON -- The Michigan State Police are asking for the public's help as they investigate the circumstances surrounding Calista Springer, the Centreville teenager who died in a house fire last week while chained to her bed.

State Police Det. Sgt. Michael Scott said he is encouraging people with first-hand knowledge of the girl, her family or the fire to contact the <u>state police</u> <u>post at White Pigeon</u> to help investigators piece together information in the case.



Calista Springer, as she appeared in her

sixth-grade yearbook photo.

"People shouldn't assume that there are records on everything that they may know," Scott said in reference to his investigation. "We want to talk to people who have first-hand knowledge. Gossip isn't going to help us. We're looking for information on both sides about this family. We're not out on a witch-hunt here."

The girl's father, Anthony Springer, has said child protection workers from the Michigan Department of Human Services had been involved with his

family on four to five occasions. He said Calista had not been abused or neglected, and he noted that she had never been removed from his home.

Scott said investigators have subpoenaed a variety of private records, including school, medical, law enforcement and child-protective services files.

"There's a lot of information to sort through -- a lot of information," Scott said.

St. Joseph County prosecutors are awaiting the results of the state police investigation.

"It's my understanding that the girl has made complaints in the past (to people within the community) of maltreatment and being chained to her bed and that she was not happy with her home life," said chief assistant prosecutor Chuck Herman, who declined to elaborate further.

County court records show that Anthony Springer's wife, Marsha, obtained a personal-protection order in 1999, alleging her husband was abusive and dangerous. She sought to have the order terminated two months later, saying they were in counseling.

Calista, 16, had been removed from public schools after sixth-grade and was being homeschooled. Anthony Springer said she would wander at night and so they tethered her to the bed for her own protection.

Firefighters found Calista in her bed Feb. 27 with a dog chain around her waist that was attached to the bed. Police have said they believe the fire was an accident and that it may have originated with a vacuum cleaner.

Scott asked that anyone with information about their contacts with Calista Springer or her parents to call him at the White Pigeon post, 269-483-7611.

Gazette staff reporter Rex Hall Jr. contributed to this report.

Preliminary exam scheduled in toddler death case

By Matt Whetstone

CADILLAC - More details could come to light in the case of a man charged with murdering a 22-month-old.

A pretrial was held Wednesday in 84th District Court for Quintin Lee Parmenter, 24, of Cadillac. Parmenter was arrested on Feb. 26 after 22-month-old Keagan Owens died at DeVos Children's Hospital from "severe head injuries.

He was subsequently charged with open murder and child abuse. Open murder carries a life sentence. The child abuse charge is punishable by up to 15 years. Because Parmenter also is charged as a two-time habitual offender, the maximum penalty could be multiplied by one-and-a-half times

The pretrial determined that a preliminary examination will be scheduled for 9 a.m. on March 18 in 84th District Court.

The preliminary examination will be the people's chance to bring witnesses to support their case against Parmenter. If there is sufficient evidence, the court could bind Parmenter over to 28th Circuit Court for a trial.

Owens was brought to Mercy "Hospital on Feb. 25 with severe head injuries. He was motionless and "nonresponsive to pain. During a probable cause hearing, Michigan State Police Trooper Gary Tropf said Parmenter told authorities the "injures were sustained from a fall.

Physicians at DeVos said they had never seen head and brain injuries that severe in a child. Tropf testified that doctors said the injuries were similar to those a child struck by a vehicle traveling 50 miles per hour would suffer.

Owens died at DeVos Hospital after surgery.

Parmenter is being lodged in the Wexford County Jail without bond.

mwhetstone@cadillacnews.com | 775-NEWS (6397)

News-Review

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Missing teen found in Alanson

Wednesday, March 5, 2008 8:21 PM EST

Troopers with the Petoskey Michigan State Police Post say a 17-year-old boy who had been missing since he walked away from his foster parents Sunday was found at about noon today, Wednesday.

Police said a relative of Matthew James Bacon, currently of Kewadin, called the post shortly before noon saying that Matthew could be found in Alanson. After confirming the information, a trooper picked Matthew up and transported him to the Michigan Department of Human Services. Police said Matthew was safe and went with the trooper willingly.

Police had been looking for Matthew since about 1:30 p.m. Sunday when he walked away from his foster parents while they were dining at the China Buffet restaurant in Bear Creek Townsh



Troopers with the Petoskey Michigan State Police Post say Matthew James Bacon, a 17-year-old boy currently of Kewadin who had been missing since he walked away from his foster parents Sunday was found at about noon today, Wednesday.

were dining at the China Buffet restaurant in Bear Creek Township. Matthew is a ward of the state until his 18th birthday on May 5.

Authorities were concerned because Matthew did not have his prescribed medications with him when he walked away from his foster parents.

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Michigan State Police seek assistance in locating missing teen

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Former teacher's new molestation trial to start Friday

By L.L. BRASIER • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • March 6, 2008

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James Perry, the former Oak Park school teacher accused of molesting two small boys at Key Elementary School in October 2005, will go on trial for the second time Friday.

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Police and prosecutors contend Perry, who has no prior criminal record, snatched the two boys from a supervised lunch line and assaulted them in an empty special education room. After two weeks of trial in September 2006, in which the boys, ages 4 and 5, gave conflicting statements, Perry was convicted of criminal sexual conduct.

But Oak Park police never interviewed the three adults who were assigned to the special ed room, all of whom say the room was occupied throughout the day and that the assault could not have happened there. Judge Denise Langford Morris ordered that Perry's conviction be overturned.

Perry is free on bond, but wears a tether. His trial, before Langford Morris, is expected to last up to a month.

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March 5, 2008

PANEL OKS BIRTH CERTIFICATE RELEASE FOR ADOPTEES

Adopted individuals who are now 21 years of age or older could receive a copy of their original birth certificate under legislation sent to the House floor on a party-line vote by the Families and Children Services Committee on Wednesday.

HB 4896 is aimed at those individuals who were adopted between May 28, 1945 and September 12, 1980 whose birth records were sealed under the law of that time. Rep. Lisa Wojno (D-Warren), the bill sponsor, said the records were sealed to protect the new adoptive families, but those adopted individuals deserve to know their birth parent's medical history.

The legislation allows a birth parent to choose whether or not to be contacted by their child at any time, but if they chose not to be contacted, a parent would still have to provide their medical history in case their child requested a birth certificate.

Rep. Fulton Sheen (D-Plainwell) said his biggest concern was that in requesting a birth certificate, the person would still see the name of their birth parents, even if that person requested not to be contacted. Ms. Wojno said in other states with this law that hasn't been a problem because the recipients are adults are respect the parent's privacy.

While the bill was not amended, Ms. Wojno said she was open to including some penalty for people who violate a parent's privacy.

Several individuals who are adopted testified in support of the bill, saying it is their right to obtain their birth certificate.

"Closed record adoptees have been swept under the rug for far too long. It is time to right this wrong and bring us some manner of parity with other adoptees across Michigan. Allow us the sense of closure that can only come with knowing where one comes from," said Denise Lindeman, an adoptee.

Not testifying, but submitting cards in opposition were the Michigan Family Forum and Right to Life of Michigan. The National Council for Adoption also submitted testimony opposing the bills.

Debates in other states, and during the committee meeting, have included a dialogue suggesting that if pregnant women know they won't be guaranteed

anonymity, they will be more likely to abort a child than to put it up for adoption. Ms. Wojno said in researching the issue, states that have these laws saw their adoption rates go up and abortion rates go down, particularly in Oregon, where the law was changed 10 years ago.

The Family Law Section of the State Bar had no opinion on the legislation and the Department of Community Health was neutral.





DETROIT

7 teens charged in robberies

Spree included 16 carjackings

BY NAOMI R. PATTON • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • March 6, 2008

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Seven Detroit teens have been charged in 36th District and Wayne County Juvenile courts in a February robbery spree that included 16 carjackings.

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Detroit police arrested Hykeem Doss, 17, and Samuel Williem Ross, 19, and two juveniles in February. Jeffery Tyrone Smith, 17, Vonshae Clark, 19, and Kevin Stephens, 17, were arrested Saturday when they were stopped for a traffic violation. Police also found a handgun in the car

Doss, Ross, Smith, Clark and Stephens were charged with armed robbery, carjacking, felonious assault and felony firearms possession. The juveniles were charged with carjacking and armed robbery.

Police said the group committed 22 crimes from Feb. 6 to 29 in Detroit -- 16 carjackings, five armed robberies and one attempted armed robbery. Six of the carjackings and two of the armed robberies took place Feb. 11.

Police said the group targeted their victims as they pumped gas or as they got into or out of their vehicles.

Several of the stolen vehicles were recovered but had been stripped for parts.

The arrests are part of an ongoing investigation and could "truly only be the tip of the iceberg," Detroit Police Chief Ella Bully-Cummings said in a statement released Wednesday.

Doss, Ross, Smith, Clark and Stephens are being held in the Wayne County Jail. The juveniles are being held at the Wayne County Juvenile Facility.

Contact NAOMI R. PATTON at 313-223-4485 or npatton@freepress.com.

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THE BAY CITY TIMES

Plan to market Juvenile Home services makes sense

Thursday, March 06, 2008

The people in charge of the Bay County Juvenile Home are looking for ways to recapture a market for housing out-of-county offenders.

Go for it.

Ten years ago, the county built a 12-bed addition as part of a renovation of the Juvenile Home in Hampton Township. The idea was to pay for improvements with money from other counties.

But Saginaw several years later expanded its juvenile detention facility. Midland built a new one.

Both are now undercutting Bay County's price, with a \$150-a-day fee in Midland and in Saginaw.

The Bay County Board of Commissioners should go along with its Personnel/Judicial Committee's votes to lower Bay County's fees from \$170.20 to \$150 a day and eliminate a \$69 physical fee for juvenile offenders from outside the county.

That's right, folks, they'll have to slash prices to get more customers in the doors.

The marketing strategy seems a bit odd, when we're talking about detention for juveniles.

But it would get the Juvenile Home back to the intent of 10 years ago - help fund the place with paying customers.

A survey, outreach to other counties and a new Web site also are planned.

The modern approach to marketing this Bay County service makes a lot of sense.

Let's try it.

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Man faces charges after fight over food

Police say suspect attacked girlfriend after she complained about smell

By Michael P. McConnell Daily Tribune Staff Writer

FERNDALE -- A Ferndale man faces a court hearing today on multiple felony charges after police say he assaulted his live-in girlfriend when she complained about the smell of some food he was cooking.

Ronald D. Little, 32, was charged in Ferndale 43rd District Court with felony assault, possession of marijuana with intent to deliver, possession of a firearm by a felon, carrying a concealed weapon, domestic violence and possessing a firearm in the commission of the alleged crimes.

Police said Little began cooking food about 12:30 a.m. Feb. 23 after he returned to the house he shares with his girlfriend in the 1400 block of Bertha.

"She was lying on the couch sleeping and complained about the smell of the food," said Ferndale Detective Lt. John Thull. "She went into a bedroom to sleep and he followed her in there and threw a handful of food at her."

The fight escalated and Little assaulted her, dragging her by the hair into the living room, police said. After the woman called her sister, Little pulled a gun on the woman and threatened to kill the sister if she showed up, police said.

"The victim then called police," Thull said. "The suspect fled the house by the time officers arrived."

Little fled on foot across Eight Mile Road into Detroit, police said.

Ferndale police called Little's cell phone and arrested him after they saw a man matching the suspect's description talking on a cell phone as he walked down the street, police said.

Little was carrying more than \$1,000 in cash, a .45-caliber handgun and several small packs of marijuana when he was arrested, police said.

Little is free on \$20,000 bond.

Contact Michael P. McConnell at mike.mcconnell@dailytribune.com or at (248) 591-2571.

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Clinic for low-income patients happy with its new location

Thursday, March 06, 2008

By Dana DeFever

ddefever@citpat.com -- 768-4945

After a yearlong search for a new home, St. Luke's Clinic is settling in nicely at its new facility at 132 Seymour Ave.

The nonprofit, which provides free primary care and pharmaceutical services to about 400 low-income patients a month, moved Feb. 25 from its previous location at 124 N. Elm Ave.

St. Luke's combined two grants it received recently from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan -- one for \$46,000 and another for \$41,000 -- to purchase the building -- a former doctors' office -- and updated equipment.

"We just can't say, "Thank you," enough," said Dr. Jim O'Connor, executive director of St. Luke's Clinic.

An anonymous donor provided the resources to have the new facility freshly painted and carpeted. The donor's identity will be revealed at the clinic's open house, which is likely to be scheduled for May.

Susan McDaniels, clinic office manager, said both the clinic's volunteer staff and the patients are excited about the new building.

``They come here with no insurance, and now they don't feel like they're second-class citizens," she said.

The new building is 2,600 square feet, and has seven patient rooms and a counseling room.

The old facility was 1,200 square feet and had three patient rooms.

The clinic also has a pharmacy; at the former facility they operated the pharmacy out of a closet.

McDaniels said the clinic also hopes to bring in more physicians and specialists. Currently, the clinic has about three nurses and a physician.

"We want to be able to increase the number of patients we serve, and in order to do that we need more volunteers," she said.

In January, the clinic feared it may have had to close after Borgess Health Alliance started charging \$1,500 a month to rent the old facility. The clinic had previously paid \$50 a month.

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Heating assistance requests escalate

Posted by Roberto Acosta | Kalamazoo Gazette

March 06, 2008 08:10AM

KALAMAZOO -- State officials recognize that rising heating costs have put a strain on Michigan residents.

"In the first quarter of 2008, we received 24,000 more applications (for heating assistance) than the same time last year," Colleen Steinman, communication spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Human Services,

The first quarter covers October to December 2007.

"That's a 42 percent increase (in applications) from the same time last year," Steinman said.

Last November, Gov. Granholm asked for additional federal assistance to aid citizens having problems with heating costs.

Steinman said that Michigan received \$27.4 million in additional funding. The state legislature has appropriated the same amount, \$116.5 million, in 2007 and 2008, but more money is going towards crisis energy assistance this year, said Maureen Sorbet, acting director of communications at MDHS.

Approximately \$37.5 million has been spent on crisis energy assistance so far this fiscal year, while \$15.8 million in home heating credits has been disbursed. \$113 million was spent on home heating assistance in 2007 and MDHS doesn't forecast a problem covering the rest of the winter. "We don't project we're going to run out," Steinman said. "But you never know with the weather."

Tim Pietryga, spokesperson for Consumers Energy, said that about 10 percent of customers this year may experience difficulty with their heating bill.

That percentage is consistent with the past few years, according to Terry DeDoes, spokesperson for Consumers Energy, who have almost 6.5 million customers in Michigan.

While putting some strain on consumers, increased heating prices have also begun to affect suppliers.

Propane prices have increased "as much as 70 cents to one dollar a gallon since last summer," said Dave Knapp, owner of Knapp Energy in Kalamazoo. The current average price for propane is \$2.44 a gallon, according to the Michigan Public Services Commission website.

He said his business is hurting as much as the consumer because of increasing prices. "There's more risk and no more profit."

"Our expenses have gone way up, but we're making the same profit margins."

"It's getting more expensive (propane) and to install the tanks," Knapp said. Delivery costs, the cost of tanks and the cost of carrying receivables have all increased as well, according to Knapp.

Propane is used to heat five percent of the nation's homes, according to numbers from the U.S. Energy Administration.

The pricing trend is also up for other heating commodities. Last week natural gas, used in 55 percent of American homes, hit its' highest trading point on the New York Stock Exchange since Feb. 2006, while heating oil traded at an all-time high. Heating oil accounts for seven percent of home heating.

Knapp said that propane prices are not regulated and "each company sets their own price based on what they are charged and profit margins," he said.

"We just look at the propane prices and what the prices are to deliver it and go from there," Knapp said.

Judy Palnau, spokesperson for the Michigan Public Services Commission, said that if consumers have a question on pricing, they should check the commission's website.

If consumers think they are the possible victim of price gouging, "we encourage them to contact us," said Matt Frendewey, spokesperson for the Michigan Attorney General's Office. "Consumers are the eyes and ears."

Under the Michigan Consumer Protection Act, price gouging is termed as "charging the consumer a price that is grossly in excess of the price at which similar property or services are sold."

Frendewey said the attorney general's office takes all calls seriously. "We track down and investigate every complaint," he said. "If there is something there, we'll pursue it to the fullest extent."

Huron Daily Tribune - News - 03/05/2008 - Many residents may not realize they qualify for earned inco... Page 1 of 1



03/05/2008

Many residents may not realize they qualify for earned income tax credit

Kate Hessling, The Huron Daily Tribune

LANSING — More than \$300 million in federal Earned Income Tax Credits went unclaimed by Michigan workers in 2006, said State Rep. Terry Brown on Monday.

The Pigeon Democrat issued a press release Monday encouraging Tuscola and Huron county residents to take advantage of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a tax break for workers with moderate or low incomes that can make a big difference in the household budgets of working families.

"Many working families are struggling to make ends meet during these tough times, and every dollar counts," Brown said in the release. "With tax season here, I want to make sure that our workers know about the EITC and how it can provide money to help them buy groceries, pay bills, and hopefully even save toward a down payment on a house or another goal. As we work to create more good-paying jobs and turn our economy around, we have to do everything we can to support our working families."

About 665,000 EITC returns were filed in Michigan in 2006. But about \$300 million in federal Earned Income Tax Credits went unclaimed by Michigan workers. According to EITC guidelines, families with one child that earned less than \$33,241 in 2007 (or less than \$35,241 for married workers) are eligible for a credit of up to \$2,853.

Families with two or more children that earned less than \$37,783 in 2007 (or less than \$39,783 for married workers) are eligible for a credit of up to \$4,716.

Workers without a qualifying child who earned less than \$12,590 in 2007 (or less than \$14,590 for married workers) are eligible for a credit of up to \$428. Michigan will debut its own state EITC starting with the 2008 tax year. Workers who qualify can receive a percentage of the federal EITC from the state on next year's tax return, in addition to what they get from the federal credit. To learn more about the EITC, and to use a free e-filing system for taxpayers with a household income of less than \$50,000, go to www.MichiganEIC.org.

Seniors, veterans and other tax filers may qualify for tax credits and deductions of their own.

Brown posted a review of various state and federal tax credits and deductions, and ways that seniors can get tax preparation assistance at house.mi.gov/tbrown. His website also has a guide to reviewing and appeal property tax assessments, and other information to help ensure that residents receive the federal tax rebates that will be issued beginning in May.

All residents must file a 2007 tax return, even if they did not have earned income.

"The EITC is an excellent tool for our workers and for our local economy, because workers spend their refunds at our community's businesses, which supports local jobs," Brown's statement reads. "Families who qualify for the EITC should check into whether they qualify for other tax credits such as the Home Heating Credit, the Homestead Property Credit, and state and federal child and dependent care credits. I encourage all residents to make the most of their tax deductions and credits."

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Equipment Mom

Mother collects sports items for needy youths

Elisabeth Waldon **Daily News correspondent**

EDMORE - Shelly Perkins loves the sporting life.

The Edmore stay-at-home mother is anything but, regularly attending sporting events at the Montabella Community Schools, where her six children attend.

Perkins went to a Rocket Football game one year and noticed a youngster who didn't have the necessary

shoes to participate. She happened to have the correct shoes in her van and the youth was able to play.

This led Perkins to begin to fill a void for area children who can't afford sports equipment that they need. She began collecting the items from local families and filling up her van.

"My van looks like a moving van," Perkins laughed. "It's so full of sports equipment. I always seem to have what somebody needs."

To date, Perkins has helped out about 30 families around area school districts, including not only Montabella but also Central Montcalm, Lakeview, Morley Stanwood, Mount Pleasant, Mount Pleasant Sacred Heart and

"I'm collecting from T-ball all the way to high school," she said. "I'm seeing a lot of kids who aren't playing and I'd rather see them play a sport than be a statistic on the streets. Call me up and ask. I'm more than happy to give it to

Shaun Balhorn, Montabella's varsity wrestling coach, youth wrestling program coach and former varsity football skipper, said Perkins' program is sorely needed.

"There's been some kids on our football team and youth wrestling program who have needed some shoes," he said. "Shelly does a really nice job.

"The parents who donate the equipment need to be recognized as well," he said. "We do have a lot of families in need.

Call Perkins at (616) 824-5213 or e-mail her at ldps_mom@hotmail.com to donate or request sports equipment, or for more information.

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Shelly Perkins' van is loaded with donated sports equipment that she distributes to needy youngsters around the area.



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March 5, 2008

STATE UNEMPLOYMENT CREEPS DOWN, BUT STILL ABOVE '07

Michigan's unemployment rate came in at 7.1 percent for the month of January, which was down .3 percentage point from December's revised rate of 7.4 percent. But the state still had more people unemployed than it did in January 2007, when the rate was 7 percent, according to figures released by the Department of Labor and Economic Growth on Wednesday. In January, total employment increased by 33,000 and unemployment decreased by 19,000, which means the labor force grew by 14,000. The national unemployment rate increased by .3 percentage point from January 2007 to January 2008 to 4.9 percent. Over the past year, statewide unemployment has decreased by 2,000, or .6 percent, however nationally, unemployment increased by 7.6 percent.

There were 4.6 million people working in January across Michigan, which has been the same since January 2007.

DLEG reported that the Detroit-Warren-Livonia Metropolitan Statistical Area's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in January decreased by .7 percentage point to 7.4 percent, which was the lowest since March 2007. December's rate was revised down from 8.5 to 8.1 percent for the area, as part of the annual revision process.

Over the past year, the metropolitan area's jobless rate went unchanged. However, since January 2007, the area's total employment decreased by 23,000 and the labor force lost 24,000, which left the unemployment level unchanged as well.

Seasonally adjusted payroll jobs rose in January by 4,000 to total 4.2 million, DLEG reported. Minor increases were reported in trade, transportation and utilities (up 4,000), construction (up 2,000, which is the first time for the industry since May 2007) and leisure and hospitality services (up 2,000).

Manufacturing experienced a 6,000 decline in payroll positions, bringing jobs in that sector back to the October 2007 level, and other major industries reported small variations in job counts. Seasonally adjusted average weekly hours and earnings of manufacturing production workers saw a raise over the month and for the past year.

DLEG noted the financial sector had shown consistent decreases for most of 2007, but its payroll positions have been stable for the past three months. Over the past year, payroll positions declined by 58,000, or 1.3 percent. Industries showing job losses were in manufacturing (down 31,000), construction (down 10,000), government (down 8,000), professional and business services (down 7,000), trade, transportation and utilities (down 6,000) and financial activities (down 4,000).

The only major industry to report job increases was in the education and health services sector, which added 11,000 jobs.





Three strong women, three strong advocates

Wednesday, March 05, 2008

Whether through retirement -- forced or otherwise -- or through promotion, or through some new good news, three strong women and three strong advocates have shared a vision for a better community: Doris Rucks, Martha Gonzalez-Cortes and Thenora Hill Beard.

* Doris Rucks, unfortunately, is the only one of the trio with somewhat of a sad note attached. The longtime member of the Muskegon County Department of Health and Human Services was not reappointed to her post even though she had reapplied to serve in a role she had continuously performed since 1970. The only positive side to that story is commissioners' appointment of ex-colleague Nancy Waters, a businesswoman and community activist, to fill Rucks' seat on the body.

However, Waters will also be filling the giant-size shoes Rucks left as perhaps the foremost advocate for the abandoned, the elderly and the impoverished. The community will miss Rucks' tough stances on ensuring all in our community received equal care and equal treatment, and we want to thank her for her long and dedicated service.

We're sure the voice of this former college professor and Muskegon Heights resident will not be stilled, though, even in enforced retirement.

* Oceana County resident Martha Gonzalez-Cortes is moving closer to home after serving in Lansing as state director of the Office of Migrant Affairs, part of the Michigan Department of Human Services, for the past five years. The Hispanic Center of Western Michigan in Grand Rapids quickly named Gonzlez-Cortes as its newest chief executive officer.

Her hiring was based on her championship, while in state office, of increased educational opportunities for the children of migrants, and her reputation as a true leader of migrant services.

Congratulations and best wishes to Gonzalez-Cortes in her new post.

* Educator Thenora Hill Beard has been enjoying her retirement for the past 14 years, when suddenly she was thrust onto our front page with the news that an annual scholarship worth \$1,000 has been established in her honor. Qualifying Muskegon Heights High School graduates who aspire to a career in teaching are eligible.

Mrs. Beard notched 41 years teaching school, as well as some of the hard lessons of life she learned in Depression-era Mississippi, where she grew up. The scholarship, established by Brighter Futures founders Melvin and S. Ann Lars, was announced during a recent church service at her Greater Harvest Baptist Church.

"It's a good feeling, helping people, but it helps you, too," she told The Chronicle. "Those who bring sunshine into somebody's life cannot help benefiting from it."

We certainly need more sunshine around here this winter -- and many more great advocates for the people, like Doris Rucks, Martha Gonzalez-Cortes and Thenora Hill Beard.

Don't end state's pet shop inspections

It appears some of the latest budget casualties of Michigan's shrinking economy are the most defenseless out there: domestic house pets. The state Department of Agriculture, which has been scaling back things for years now, has said it will abandon most inspections of stores that sell house pets unless complaints tell of serious abuse or disease outbreaks.

Steve Halstead, a veterinarian for the department, laments the move away from close scrutiny of stores: "I have concerns that by not having the presence that we should, animals will suffer." We worry, too.

Among the rules the department once enforced through unannounced visits to pet stores were guidelines for overcrowding, treatment of sick or injured animals and requirements governing the provision of adequate food and water.

While the vast majority of stores are humane and caring for the pets they sell, we fear the news that inspections are being stopped will result in relaxed vigilance by some unscrupulous owners or negligent employees. That leaves you, the consumer, as the only "guardians" of these animals, so be sure to report neglect or abuse if you see it.

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Michigan Department of Human Services News Release

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Former foster youth share Voice 2 with legislators

March 5, 2008

Foster youths today presented member of the Michigan Legislature a report outlining ten priorities to guide state policies and services for foster youths soon to leave care.

"Voice 2: Discussing Issues and Concerns of Michigan Foster Youth" is the work of 18 youth boards representing 28 counties. It evaluates the progress on the youth boards' original 15 recommendations issued in 2005 and asks the Michigan Department of Human Services and Michigan courts to continue

working on issues critical to young adults who will soon leave or have recently left foster care.

DHS Director Ismael Ahmed spoke with the youths in December about their report and urged them to share the report with their local legislators.

"Lawmakers can enact certain reforms that help foster youths mature into self-sufficient adults," Ahmed said. "I was very moved by their stories and I know lawmakers will be too."

Some of the recommendations include devoting resources to keep families together, maintaining sibling connections, involving youths in decisions, and ensuring youths have education and housing before leaving foster care. A very important focus is the need for all young people to have a permanent connection to a caring adult before they leave foster care. The full document can be viewed on the Foster Youth in Transition Web site at www.michigan.gov/fyit

A study of former foster youths in three Midwestern states found foster youths departing at age 18 were:

• Three times more likely than their peers who had not been in foster care

to be unemployed or not in school.

- Twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent.
- Fewer than half had bank accounts.
- 30 percent of the males and 11 percent of the females had been incarcerated at least once after leaving foster care.

A survey of 237 Michigan foster youths ages 18-23 found similar outcomes. Only 12 percent were employed full time and only 36 percent were working part time. More than half were on public assistance and 40 percent said they were either homeless or had no stable housing.

"The youth boards are critical to helping change these outcomes," said Kate Hanley, who manages DHS permanency programs. "We're making excellent progress in addressing their most basic needs, but there is more to be done and this document helps articulate where we can devote our resources to do the most good."

The youths want to see more resources devoted to preserving families through supports that allow them to remain safely with their birth parents. If they must be removed from the home, they want a "Sibling Bill of Rights" that allows them to be placed with their siblings or have structured contact with them. The youths also want a say in decisions made about their placement. "Nothing about us without us" is the motto caseworkers are urged

to adopt in team decision-making meetings that determine where a youth will

be placed.

Supports to help youths learn to drive and obtain a driver's license, apply for higher education financial aid, and obtain important life skills such as financial planning are critical to help the transition from foster youth to adult, the report states.

For more information and copies of Voice 2 and the progress report on Voice

1, go to www.michigan.gov/dhs or www.michigan.gov/fyit ###